

Integration Strategies of the Chadian Student Diaspora in the Context of Vocational Training: The Case of Free Auditors at the École Normale Supérieure of Yaoundé (Cameroon)

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Introduction

The link between the issue of migration and that of education has been widely demonstrated in works of diverse disciplinary origins (Assogba, 2002: 5; Endrizzi, 2010: 34). These two subjects influence each other reciprocally. Educational migrations are not absolutely distinct from economic migrations, while all other forms of migrations are among the most recurrent. School migration is a privileged object of study in educational sciences (Bouchamma & Benimmas, 2007: 51) and is very present in Cameroon (Massoma, 2021: 2).

1. Context of the study

The current context in Central Africa is that of the initiation of regional and cross-border educational integration. It is manifested by the validation of the Licence-Master-Doctorat system as the specific system of universities in the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC)' zone, but also by the creation of regional educational structures. These structures are called upon to strengthen educational migrations. This is the case of the School of Hospitality and Tourism of CEMAC, the Inter-State School of Customs or the Inter-State University Cameroon-Congo. To this it must be added that the CEMAC states ratified in December 2021 a directive relating to free movement and the establishment of educational structures on the territory of the CEMAC.

Cameroon is engaged in a process of sub-regional and even regional integration. Many young people arrive every year from other countries to enroll in the educational and vocational training institutions available in Cameroon (Djiraro Mangué *et al.*, 2021: 13). The attractiveness of Cameroon's educational offer is mainly characterized by the densification and diversification of academic and vocational training programs.

 <https://doi.org/10.21747/0874-2375/afr41a7>

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1 The Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) is a sub-regional organization of Black Africa.

In higher education, the creation of new universities and the consequent increase in academic and professional training opportunities have made Cameroon a first-choice destination for students from the sub-region (Bukar, 2008: 11). Chadian students are no exception, as available statistics confirm. While Chad's fourteen cities have a combined student population of almost 57,500, Cameroon hosts 70,000 Chadian students².

2. Problems of the study

In March 2022, news concerning Chadian students in Cameroon made headlines in the press. It concerned a press conference held by the “Dang Remember” association³. During this press conference, which was widely reported in Chad and on student social networks in both countries, this association sounded the alarm about the difficult integration conditions and growing insecurity faced by the Chadian student community in Cameroon.

We therefore sought to shed some light on the particularities of the integration of the Chadian student diaspora at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé. According to the school's student services department, for the 2023-2024 academic year, the total number of students was 2771, including 64 Chadians, i.e. 2.31 % of the student population. Moreover, vocational training in a teacher training college offers a training context whose requirements are well above those of conventional university faculties. In other words, in the context of vocational training at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé, how is the Chadian student diaspora integrated? The premise of this study is that the constraints of vocational training and weak institutional support force Chadian students at ENS to deploy constraining modes of integration. To verify this hypothesis, it is essential to theorize the study.

3. Theoretical framework of the study

This study uses a conceptual clarification, a review of the scientific literature on the Chadian student diaspora and a mobilization of theories explaining student integration.

3.1. Integration and diaspora: conceptual clarification

Widely discussed in scientific literature (Schnapper, 1991: 105, 2007: 98, 2008: 36; Keith, 2008: 23), the overly generic concept of integration is used in the present study in its sociological sense. Integration is the manifestation of participation in social life (Mankou, 2021: 5). While Boucher (2007) sees it as a “catch-all” term, other sociologists define it as a process of resocialization (Khelil, 1997: 41) that takes shape in the “little nothings” (Sayad, 1994: 32) - i.e. the sometimes trivial or insignificant actions that accumulate on a daily basis (Latrèche, 2001: 10). All these authors point out that the agents of integration include the family, the media, peer groups, the world of work, and school.

In other words, integration is possible both at home and within the diaspora. According to the International Association of the Algerian Diaspora, diaspora means “the dispersal of an ethnic community or people throughout the world, while

² This figure is put forward by Dr. Tom Erdimi, Minister of State for Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. First, in February 2023 in N'Djamena during the 5th edition of the governors' conference, then in November of the same year in Yaoundé during the audience granted to him by his Cameroonian counterpart.

³ This is the association of Chadian graduates of the University of N'Gaoundéré.

remaining in contact [with the country of origin]”. The only person who can claim to be part of a diaspora is “a migrant who maintains ties with his or her country of origin” (International Organization for Migration, 2013)⁴.

Diasporas are thus formed around the pursuit of better opportunities that the host country can provide directly, or that it can give them the means to acquire. It is in the latter case that most Chadian students in foreign lands find themselves. This is what emerges from scientific literature.

3.2. Literature review on the Chadian student diaspora

Student immigration is one of the most widespread in the world. It is therefore not surprising to find it in Africa. While there is an abundance of scientific literature on the Chadian diaspora, three works in particular caught our attention because of their specific focus on the student diaspora. Regarding the motives for this student migration, Nguirmanal (2017: 32) reveals that socio-political instability, economic recession, and the irregularity of the academic calendars in Chadian universities push Chadian students to seek a university degree outside their national territory. Massoma (2021: 7), focusing on the Chadian student diaspora at the University of Maroua (Cameroon), adds that geographical proximity, sociolinguistic and cultural similarities, and the quality-cost ratio of education are also reasons for Chadian students to immigrate.

However, according to Longmene Fopa & Ngankeu (2023: 85), it is important to specify that student migration from Chad, particularly to Cameroon, represents a second wave of migration. Chadians initially arrived in Cameroon, particularly in Dschang, for economic and commercial reasons. They were the first economic immigrants to be welcomed, facilitating the subsequent integration of students. Finally, Nguirmanal (2017: 45) argues that the integration of Chadian students is facilitated by their “strong herd instinct”, which is an asset in their integration process. However, this aspect is not sufficiently developed in this work, highlighting the need to examine the strategies implemented by this student diaspora in their integration process.

Although this study follows the existing scientific literature on Chadian student migration to Cameroon, it focuses on student migration within a vocational training context. In our view, this context adds an extra layer of difficulty to the integration process. Indeed, the constraints inherent in vocational training are generally a source of pressure and stress for students in higher education. When it comes to individuals far from their native land, we believe this situation makes the integration process even more difficult, leading them to surpass themselves.

3.3. The Chicago school for understanding Chadian student migration to ENS Yaoundé

The integration strategies of the Chadian diaspora at the ENS in Yaoundé align with mobility driven by intellectual training (Latrèche 2001: 45).

4 At the International Organization for Migration Ministerial Conference on Diaspora, held in Geneva on June 18 and 19 of 2013, diasporas were defined as “transnational communities” connected to more than one country, a society or a community. They include migrants and their descendants who share a common identity and sense of belonging. They develop networks that enable the better circulation of goods and services, investment, skills and knowledge and work as “ambassadors” of their societies of origin, and stimulators of cultural exchange. Conference participants recognized that diasporas could build bridges between states and societies and called for the development of local and global strategies to encourage this potential.

To understand this individual and collective transcendence among the Chadian *auditeurs libres*⁵ studying at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé, we have drawn on the theoretical approach to immigration developed by the Chicago School.

The work of the Chicago School is the founding text of urban sociology in general and the sociology of immigration in particular. The Chicago sociologists described the phenomena that follow the arrival of migrants in the host society and which, even if they are characterized by periods of conflict or disharmony, inevitably lead to integration or even assimilation (Chapoulie, 2002: 42). Originating in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago, this movement was the first to break away from the theoretical and speculative research of sociology in the university context, particularly concerning migration (Chapoulie, 2002: 21).

While some approaches, particularly in France and Germany, question immigration in terms of quantification and socio-economic effects, the American approach has the merit of focusing on the qualitative aspects of migration. In reality, it is the principle of adaptation and adaptability of the immigrant as developed by Chicago that interests us. The paradigm of this school postulates that immigrants integrate by adapting to their environment, while the environment simultaneously creates the conditions for this adaptation (Chapoulie 2002: 15). We speak of reciprocal adjustment, of compromises negotiated or not. With this approach we are trying to understand the reciprocal adjustment that takes place between Chadian students and the training environment at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé. Although these students have to adapt to the socio-cultural customs and practices specific to the educational environment, the fact remains that the training institution provides them with resources to facilitate their academic integration. In order to gain a better understanding of the aspects in which these adaptability compromises occur (or do not), it is imperative to deploy a methodological approach.

4. Methodological framework of the study

The postulate that best explains the choice of methodological approach for this study is the one formulated by (Dubois 2014: 72): “by dint of considering immigration from a quantified angle, we obscure the reasons that may explain migratory flows”. In other words, this study does not analyze Chadian student migration to the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé from a quantitative perspective, but rather seeks to understand the quality of integration processes within a vocational training context.

The approach is therefore deductive, and the analysis is essentially qualitative. It is based on descriptive data derived from direct observation and documentary analysis, as well as on the opinions expressed by the subjects surveyed. The interviews took place between January and April 2024. A simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents according to two predefined selection criteria: Chadian nationality and proof of enrolment as a *auditeur libre* at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé. The convenience method was used to select a sample of thirty-seven (37) participants (29 boys and 8 girls).

Three semi-directives focus group interviews were conducted, considering the methodological rigor of qualitative studies (Napoli, 2022: 7). The interview guide was structured around three themes: institutional support, individual integration

5 Free auditor status is conferred on students who join a major training school based on file review. They are trained at the same time and under the same teaching and learning conditions as students who have joined the Higher School following a competitive examination.

strategies, and collective strategies. To analyze the data, we used thematic content analysis as described by Paillé & Muchielli (2012: 8). This method involves identifying recurring general themes in the verbal expressions of interviewees, which appear under a variety of more concrete content. This methodological approach led to an interpretation of the results.

5. Study results

This study presents three main results. Firstly, the integration of the Chadian student diaspora in vocational training at higher teacher's training school Yaoundé benefits from institutional support (Chadians and Cameroonians). It takes shape in the individual and collective initiatives of Chadian students.

5.1. Institutional support for the integration of Chadian students at higher teacher's training school Yaoundé

5.1.1. Chad's "weak" institutional support for its ENS Yaoundé student diaspora

Cameroon and Chad signed a cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation agreement on December 21, 1985. Currently, there is no specific agreement on higher education between the two countries. However, the participation of a delegation from the University of N'Djamena at the 2019 University Games in Maroua testifies to the existence of university cooperation between Chad and Cameroon. It also signals ongoing efforts by the Chadian government via its embassy in Cameroon, and by Cameroonian higher education authorities to facilitate the integration of students of Chadian origin at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé.

As far as the Chadian authorities are concerned, the Chadian embassy in Cameroon never hesitates to recommend Chadian students applying for admission as *auditeurs libres* at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé. It also provides all the official documentation these students need every time. The Chadian authorities also regularly send missions to Cameroon to monitor the integration of their nationals. The most recent mission took place on March 18, 2024. To date, the joint mission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Chadians Abroad, along with the Ministry of Public Security, has held several working sessions at the Chadian Embassy in Cameroon. One of these consisted of discussions with a delegation from the coordination of Chadian student associations in Cameroon.

According to our interviewees, this meeting enabled them to "*carefully examine the difficulties faced by Chadians in Cameroon*". A number of topics were discussed, including the issue of equivalence certificates for Chadian students in Cameroon. Finally, the Chadian *normaliens*⁶ assured us that when the necessary, working sessions are organized between the embassy officials and the leaders of the *Bureau de la Coordination des Associations des Étudiants Tchadiens* au Cameroun. However, the resolutions adopted in these meetings are not effectively followed up. The heads of Chadian student associations state that "*good decisions are taken but have never been implemented*".

Among these student leaders is the president of the association of Chadian students at higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé. According to him, "*even if the support*

6 *Normalien* is the common non given to students in training within the normal schools of Cameroon.

is perceptible before and during the training, our country, via its embassy, does not yet grant scholarships for this training at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé". The vast majority of our interviewees therefore describe the support they receive from their home country's government at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé as "weak".

5.1.2. Cameroon's "acceptable" facilities for the Chadian student diaspora at higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé

As for the Cameroonian authorities, it must be emphasized that the first measure was compliance with the CEMAC agreement on tuition fees in state universities. It was 50,000 CFA francs for classic programs. It should be noted that in Cameroon, for professional courses and graduate schools, the costs are a little more considerable. Notably, the cost of training for *auditeurs libres* oscillates between 300,000 CFA francs and 450,000 CFA francs in other training schools in Cameroon. However, at the ENS in Yaoundé, this fee was capped at 50,000 CFA francs until August 2024. This special exemption in this establishment applied even to foreign nationals enrolled in this institution.

In addition, foreign students, particularly Chadian ones, are treated almost on the same footing as Cameroonian *auditeurs libres*. They benefit from the same rights and duties, have similar training offers and pathways: student accommodation, university catering, student delegate status. As an example, Chadian *auditeurs libres* claim to have benefited in the same way as nationals from PBHev brand laptops. This was not the case for their fellow students within the faculties of the University of Yaoundé¹ and in other major schools in Cameroon. These laptops were distributed during a donation campaign by the Cameroonian government, to the benefit of the student population, through the Ministry of Higher Education.

Moreover, *normaliens* of Chadian origin at higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé benefit from institutional support both from their country of origin and from their host country. This is evident in the financial assistance for training and various forms of support that help facilitate their academic journey. These elements are likely to facilitate their individual and collective "resocialization" in the city of Yaoundé. The vast majority of interviewees therefore characterize this support from Cameroon as "acceptable".

5.2. Individual and collective integration strategies of the Chadian student diaspora at higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé

5.2.1. Individual integration strategies

The way in which Chadian *normaliens* in Yaoundé approach their daily activities best reflects their individual strategies for integration. It should be remembered that, compared to the training course in a traditional faculty, training at the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé is more demanding in terms of course scheduling, material requirements, and financial obligations. As one interviewee explained: "Here at the normal school, the rhythm of the lessons is that of high school, that is to say from Monday to Friday (...) sometimes on Saturday certain tutorials are organized". Listening to them, we see that the intense academic agenda is not to their liking.

Therefore, unlike their colleagues enrolled in traditional faculties, Chadians at the higher teacher's training school Yaoundé do not have a wide range of choices in terms of extra-academic economic activity. In other words, they cannot easily carry out daytime activities such as working in a hair salon, online sales, running a grocery store or a mini boutique.

This is why most people work in "nocturnal jobs". 24 of our 37 interviewees said they were involved in night guarding, night hawking and night motorbike taxiing. Despite the risks associated with these activities, they believe these jobs provide significant benefits. Thus, eight interviewees said they work as night guards and are satisfied with it: *"this security work in Bastos or Odza gives us 50,000 CFA francs each month, with that you normally pay your pension and your rent without waiting for the money that the family sends you every month or quarter"*. Five other interviewees, stated that *"selling at night at the Emia crossroads, even if it is tiring, at least allows us to be present on campus every day and to have a little money"*.

5.2.2. Shared accommodation and associative movements as collective integration strategies

Studying far from home is not an easy thing for many Chadian students. Some, due to financial problems, are forced to find a job just to secure a place to sleep. In this regard, *normaliens* stand out due to their lifestyle. It should be noted from the outset that upon observation, Chadian students tend to live together and are very supportive of each other. Indeed, in terms of rental strategy, we discover that Chadians from the higher teacher's training school mainly opt for shared accommodation. Typically, three or four students share a single room near the campus, splitting expenses such as rent, electricity, water, and cable bills. This cost-sharing is done in an informal yet organized manner.

In addition, each group adapts to the socio-economic realities of individuals. According to the interviewees, this strategy has not only economic but social advantages, particularly in preventing conflicts. Indeed, far from their native land, they find comfort in living with those who share their social habits, language, and culture. They also take care of each other, providing services and supporting each other in academic life.

This sense of community life, useful for their integration is further strengthened through the student associative and community movements which abound in the student sphere of Yaoundé. At the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé, the main existing and active associative movement is the association of Chadian students of the Yaoundé Normal School. This association is apolitical and does not have an official status. It has 43 members out of the 64 Chadians registered in this establishment during the academic year 2023-2024. It also organizes mentorship for newcomers, sports and cultural activities, assistance with academic paperwork, refresher courses, and even job placement support.

At the higher teacher's training school of Yaoundé, it is an environment of resocialization useful to the Chadian diaspora, a framework of adaptation and development necessary for the regulation of stress. The association is a framework for reflection and consultation within this school. She helps old and new alike to get by. For example, she provides them with old lessons and old composition subjects. This association is therefore for them an ideal framework for student engagement, the creation of social links, and for the expression and achievement of academic and professional objectives.

6. Discussion of the results of the study

It would be illusory to conclude that the integration of Chadian *normaliens* in Cameroon, particularly in Yaoundé, is easy. As our results suggest, integration does not happen smoothly. Dubois (2014: 12) explains that large-scale immigration cannot be achieved without bringing new elements into the host environment. These are the elements which, at the level of university life, are at the origin of what we call the shock of habitus. Chadian students not only face academic pressures but also security concerns in the city, including attacks and road harassment. While some of these incidents stem from their frequent nighttime activities, their irregular migration status also exposes them to difficulties with the police authorities (Massoma, 2021: 11).

In addition, we also report threats, attacks and theft by Cameroonians who perceived them as very wealthy (Longmene Fopa & Ngankeu, 2023: 32). The multilingual nature of higher education in Cameroon poses problems for Chadian students, as many are unfamiliar with foreign languages apart from Arabic (Goron, 2014: 33). Furthermore, the “cohabiting” lifestyle and the “below average” performance of most students (Nguirmanal, 2017: 12) are often a source of tension and quarrels and conflicts.

Conclusion

The integration of the Chadian student diaspora is marked by weak Chadian institutional support and moderate support from the State of Cameroon. Through nocturnal economic activities, shared accommodation and associative movements, these students try to carve out a place for themselves within this institution in particular and in the city of Yaoundé in general. However, it would be interesting to examine the socio-professional integration of Chadian graduates from Cameroonian universities. Is return migration part of the migration projects of Chadian students enrolled in Cameroonian universities? Could the meteoric rise of figures like as Gabriel Mbairobe inspire them to build successful careers in Cameroon? Finally, is there a potential for the construction of a “diaspora within the diaspora” among Chadian graduates?

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Acronyms

CEMAC - Central African Economic and Monetary Community.

ENS - Ecole Normale Supérieure.

